

METRO

Sultana Disaster Museum to preserve tragic story in new home

By [Keely Brewer](#), Daily Memphian

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In this April 26, 1865, file photo provided by the Library of Congress, the steamboat Sultana is docked on the Mississippi River at Helena, Arkansas. About 1,800 people died when the boat exploded the following night near Marion, Arkansas. (AP Photo/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, File)

The worst maritime disaster in U.S. history happened on the Mississippi River near Memphis, but the Sultana's story was mostly forgotten for more than a century.

The steamboat's boilers caught fire near Memphis on April 27, 1865, before it sank into a muddy grave on the Arkansas banks.

In 2015, a modest museum opened in Marion, Arkansas — the city closest to the site — to tell its story.

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Now, after years of fundraising, the Sultana Historical Preservation Society is repurposing the old Marion High School gymnasium to house a permanent museum, which broke ground on Veterans Day — an appropriate nod to the soldiers who died in the disaster, attendees said.



Left to right: Arkansas Rep. Rick Crawford; former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater; Marion, Arkansas, Mayor Frank Fogleman; Marion Mayor-Elect Tracy Brick; President of the Sultana Historical Preservation Society John Fogleman, and Arkansas Sen. John Boozman take ground-breaking honors.

(Courtesy Smith Artisan Photography)

The steamboat was carrying more than 2,400 Union prisoners of war — six times the permitted number of passengers. More than half of them died. Later investigations revealed a litany of corrupt practices that caused the overcrowding.

In the decades after the disaster, survivors petitioned for a monument so the Sultana wouldn't be forgotten, but they didn't live to see one.

“It's taken a long time — over 150 years — but we have not forgotten, and with this museum, they will never be forgotten,” said John Fogleman, president of the Sultana Historical Preservation Society, at the groundbreaking ceremony.

Other historic events overshadowed the Sultana. In the weeks leading up to the disaster, Robert E. Lee surrendered, and Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. The day before the Sultana sank, Lincoln's assassin John Wilkes Booth was killed.

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Former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater said few people know about the tragedy, “likely due to the chaos and uncertainty created by the gut-wrenching events of April 1865.”

The historical society is halfway to its \$13 million fundraising goal. It's received a \$500,000 grant from the Delta Regional Authority, a \$1 million grant from the American Rescue Plan and a \$750,000 investment from Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchison, among other contributions.

The river defines who we were and who we will become



Former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Rodney Slater speaks at the Sultana Disaster Museum groundbreaking on Nov. 11, 2022. (Courtesy Smith Artisan Photography)

Now, as it enters the second phase of its capital campaign, the museum is accepting donations and selling bricks. They've received 150 donations so far, from a high schooler's \$10 check in his grandfather's honor to six-digit contributions.

"Every single one of those dollars is important, and every single one of those dollars has gotten us to where we are," said Marion Mayor-Elect Tracy Brick.

The Sultana Disaster Museum is expected to open in late 2023 or early 2024. Until then, the museum at 104 Washington St. remains open.

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Keely Brewer is a Report for America corps member covering environmental impacts on communities of color in Memphis. She is working in partnership with the Ag & Water Desk, a sustainable reporting network aimed at telling water and agriculture stories across the Mississippi River Basin.